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OPERATIONAL ART ON THE SUPERHIGHWAY...SUCCESS WITH THE PRESS

by

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LtCol, USMC

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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16 May 1995

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In the future, successful commanders at the operational level must emphasize the importance of press implications prior to, during, and after their operations. As regional economic and ethnic disparities become flashpoints, the press, with its advanced communication technology, will expand the battlespace globally and blur the differences between the strategic and operational level. The capability to transmit instant images to a global audience will fracture military organizations that are unprepared to articulate, argue the merits, and defend the implications of their policy. The successful military leaders will understand the vast implications of this concept and use it to their advantage.

This paper examines the impact of the press on future JTF commanders at the strategic and operational levels, citing examples from the Persian Gulf War and the Somalia and Haiti operations. It concludes by recommending ways for the commander to be successful in the future "media" wars.

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Preface

This paper was written expressly for future commanders at the operational level. It stresses three very important points: (a) that the press will continue to have a sizable impact on military operations at the strategic and operational level, (b) that commanders will have no choice but to consider press implications in every major decision prior to, during, and after an operation, and (c) that there are fundamental, practical steps a commander can take to be successful with the press.

Operational Art On The Superhighway...Success With The Press

The Future: Economics, Technology, and Strife

The Cold War's end, with its images of the crumbling Berlin Wall, has sparked the worldwide transformation of new ideas igniting the requirement for innovative perspectives. This transformation, affected primarily by economics and technology, will revolutionize the U.S. military. The effects of a reduced budget and the continued explosion of technology will force our military to undergo wrenching changes in organization, budgeting, acquisition, training, and warfighting. For example, by the year 2000 the projected budget will decrease from its present \$400 billion level to about \$220 billion. Military down-sizing and cutbacks are a global phenomenon not unique to the U.S. The result is that collective security measures, collective defense, or ad-hoc coalitions will change the way most military forces operate in the future. Retooling the U.S. military will mean smaller forces working jointly or combined. Service unique stovepipes will continue to be strangled; platforms will be leveraged for joint application; unified CINCs will continue to gain importance at the expense of service chiefs; and the U.S. will fight and conduct operations principally by joint or combined task forces (J/CTFs).¹

While the military refocuses, the world will become more complex and dangerous. Economic disparities will increase. There will be a tendency for populations in the third world countries to rise and for wealth to fall. In the more developed countries, the trend will be reversed. By the end of the century, the more developed countries could own 85% of the world's wealth. Today 1.25 billion people live below the poverty line, which is about \$700 per year per family. The situation may worsen. In places like North Africa, rampant unemployment could increase from 40% to 70%.² The evidence of fabric-splitting societal pressures is

everywhere...Bosnia, Russia, China, Rwanda, Peru...take your pick. Where to start? This turmoil demands action, increases security requirements, and questions sovereignty. Paradoxically, as wide spread unrest has increased, there seems to be an increased demand for the UN, while simultaneously many countries and their citizens have been reluctant to get involved. Balancing the requirements of security and sovereignty will be a hotly debated issue in the future. There are four examples which illustrate this idea: First, porous borders and increasing ethnic conflict make stability and measured change increasingly difficult for countries to control their sovereignty. In Ethiopia alone, people speak 66 different languages and these cultural differences have led to ethnic violence.³ Second, mineral rights like oil and water are particularly susceptible to security and sovereignty arguments. Iraq's claim that the Kuwaitis were "slant drilling" their oil from the Kuwaiti side is one example.⁴ Another more explosive issue may be the control of water as it crosses boundaries. Third, the globalization of finance reduces the capability of nations to cope with their own unique economic problems.⁵ There is little countries can do as their currency is traded around the world thousands of times at the blink of an eye. Fourth, as disparate groups turn to weapons of mass destruction for terrorism, countries will give up part of their sovereignty to gain collectively what they cannot individually: peace and security.⁶ What is certain about the future is that the world will continue to be dangerous with continued regional flashpoints and turmoil.

Another important part of this equation is the impact of the press and its technology on military operations in the 21st century. The intense scrutiny of the press and its technological capability to transmit real time images could have a tendency to affect adversely the decision-making of the JTF commander and his organization. Future JTF commanders will know

more in real time, 24 hours a day about their operational environment and will be able to see, shoot, and communicate deeper into the battlefield. Notably, so will their opponents, superiors (CINC and DOD), and the press.

The technological capabilities of the press in the next few years will be "mind boggling." By 1988, 98% of the cities of the world with populations over 100k will be inter-linked by fiber optics cables. This will allow the press to transmit data and images 10,000 times greater than they can today. By 1997, the 40-60 satellites making up the global cellular net will allow anyone to communicate anywhere over the face of the globe. Journalists, with their palm-size digital video cameras, will be able to uplink audio, print, and video images from anywhere in the world in a matter of minutes. Additionally, wide band satellite capabilities will allow CNN to transmit from Atlanta around the world in 37 languages.⁷ CNN's dominance in worldwide television will be only temporary; rival networks are already forming.⁸

As national and international press swarm to hot spots, JTF commanders will be forced to consider the implications of advanced technology related to the policies and objectives of their operations. Commanders will usually arrive in an immature theater to meet prepositioned journalists with global instant communications. The successful commanders will be prepared; the unsuccessful ones will be victims. One thing is clear. It won't be business as usual, and the old rules of press avoidance or absolute control are gone forever. Balanced with military security and safety issues will be the requirement to work with the press.

History is replete with examples of military commanders keeping their distance from the press. General "Blackjack" Pershing's relationship with the press illustrates this point. Immediately upon his arrival to France, Westbrook Pegler, a young reporter, told his older

colleagues that he was going to interview General Pershing, Commander of U.S. Forces. General Pershing, as the older correspondents knew, gave no press interviews, no press conferences: he didn't believe in "war reporting." When Pegler returned from his "interview" at headquarters and began typing furiously, one of his colleagues asked Pegler what Pershing had said. Pegler ripped his paper out of the typewriter. He read, "This correspondent had an interview with General Pershing today. The General said, 'Pegler, get the hell out of my office.'"⁹

Since Pershing's time, particularly during and since the Persian Gulf War, the intrusion and impact of the press has changed the nature of military operations. It increasingly influences decision-making and alters the way the military is organized and communicates externally and internally. Whether this is a favorable development is perhaps irrelevant; it is certainly irreversible. Although somewhat drastic, there is truth to Winston Churchill's prophecy about military-press relations. The military he said, "should learn to get used to it. Eels get used to skinning."¹⁰

Given the concerns expressed above, what can future operational commanders do to adapt their policies, strategies, and plans in order to support their goals in a media intensive environment? The remainder of this paper will examine the impact of the press on future JTF commanders at the strategic and operational levels, citing examples drawn from the Persian Gulf War and the Somalia and Haiti operations. It concludes by recommending ways to ensure success in the future "media" wars.

Strategic Level

With the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the world witnessed an unmistakable "media war, ranking with the air war [and] the ground war...in determining victory. After the

Gulf War, it will never again be possible to discuss the conduct of war without reference to the press."¹¹ Traditional power politics, a process based primarily on the military-political capacity of nations, is transforming; technology and global communications are the catalyst for this change. The name of the game is "media diplomacy" and those that do it best design their plans around images that make policy real, observable, acceptable, and credible. Additionally, there is increasing evidence that the control of images (video and print) is central to the exercise of power and influence. A review of military-press relations indicates that the press has controlled these images more than military decision-makers, particularly during crisis or conflict.¹² During the Gulf War, our leaders at the strategic level recognized the importance of being proactive in controlling images; consequently, two important and far-reaching trends occurred.

First, diplomacy was conducted live over television. The best example was the exchange between Saddam Hussein and President Bush regarding the Iraqi peace initiative. Following Saddam's "outrageous terms," Bush immediately went on television replying that the offer was a "cruel hoax."¹³ Television had brought the diplomatic gestures of war and peace directly to the American public. Even General Schwarzkopf's press briefings were aimed at Saddam, as well as, designed to provide information to Americans and the world.¹⁴ In addition, the Pentagon recognized the influence of television shaping public opinion. General Powell underscored this point when he cautioned military commanders, "Once you've got the forces moving and everything's being taken care of by the commanders...turn your attention to television because you can win the battle or lose the war if you don't handle the story right."¹⁵ Ironically, Clausewitz's theory about the interrelationship between the government, military, and public becomes even more important in an age of global communications. In the future, the press will operate around

this "triangle," and anybody that wants to influence somebody else can reach out and hook into it. The message thus gets amplified, colored, and dramatized.¹⁶ The press, in effect, could become like another branch of government.

The second trend emphasizes the importance DOD placed on maintaining public support for the prosecution of the war. The decision to conduct the daily press briefings at the Pentagon and in Riyadh illustrates the importance the Pentagon placed on press coverage as the conduit to the American and international public for the purpose of sustaining popular support. This was the first war that the public was "briefed" live twice daily. It also illustrates the impact the Pentagon had over the public affairs effort at CENTCOM. DOD had direct influence as to the timing, format, and the selection of the briefer.¹⁷ Marine Brigadier General Butch Neal was finally acceptable after an initial attempt by CENTCOM to put a Lieutenant Colonel before the press, followed by an Army general who was either reluctant to talk or was out of the loop. This speaks volumes to the import the Pentagon placed on images and the use of images to promote public support not only from Americans, but also from its coalition "partners." Further, it brought new meaning to the old saw that public affairs is too important to be left to the public affairs officer. Pentagon intrusion into the public affairs operation at CENTCOM shows that public affairs in the future may be too important to be left to the operational commander. At a minimum, this trend points out that the operational commander will be forced to consider press implications in every action.

These trends have led to proposed Pentagon initiatives that will continue to intrude on the operational commander. The proposed Global Command and Control System is one example. Another is a staffing proposal to stand up a joint media operation center (JMOC).¹⁸ The JMOC

would be a "stand alone, fully deployable military media center, adjunct to OSD(PA) to ensure that military crises...are covered realistically and accurately." Further it would "ensure the national and international media access to the unfolding events from a DOD perspective." In the concept paper's foreword DOD makes four key points: First, there will be new challenges, requiring rapid response across the spectrum of military operations. Second, that our "military leaders recognize the significant impact that the evolving global information environment (GIE) is having on operations." Third, there is a recognition that live coverage bypasses the chain of command. The press bridges "the gap between the strategic, operational, and tactical levels and enables audiences to witness, react, and comment on these events before our military leaders can analyze, evaluate, or place them into perspective." Fourth, operational constraints imposed by press coverage can, "cause the mission or end-state to be redefined, or affect the direction, range and duration of operations." I consider the proposed JMOC a direct outgrowth of the problems DOD experienced during the Gulf War. It is this experience, coupled with the recognition that live coverage of war strains the operational commander's capability to plan, organize, and respond effectively to global communications, that has precipitated the increased intrusion of DOD at the operational level . There is little doubt that the JMOC concept is proposed to assist the operational commander. At best, there is also little doubt that this concept will be difficult to manage. At worst, it will take an inconsiderable amount of coordination and disrupt the operational commander's ability to assume control of his area of operations.

In sum, the influence of leaders at the strategic level to affect the operational commander is increasing. While there is no doubt that the operational commander will have more control of the battlefield, his superiors will become more involved in operational matters as strategic and

operational issues begin to merge. It is not inconceivable, that with the continued explosion of communication technology, future wars could be reported from the Pentagon as much as the field.

Operational Level

Many believe and most agree that the operational commander's responsibility will increase as new technology and doctrine expand the size and depth of the battlefield. Organizing the area of operations arguably then becomes his first and most important task. He is responsible for planning, directing, coordinating, and controlling military forces for the accomplishment of assigned missions. Facing many imponderables, the commander strives for maximum control over events, including media coverage. The reason for this control is simple: images charged with raw emotion are now viewed globally as they unfold in real time. This fact presents the commander with problems that not only are distracting, but increasingly affect the decision-making process at the point where the strategic and operational levels mesh. The images of the Highway 6 convoy bombing, that the press dubbed the "Highway of Death," provide a good example of the problem of the strategic and operational levels of war merging. Shortly after the operation, Powell informed Schwarzkopf that, "We ought to be thinking about a cease-fire. The doves are complaining about all the damage you're doing." Powell's reference to the four lane road, strewn with wreckage of more than a thousand vehicles, related his concern that "the reports make it look like wanton killing." Schwarzkopf realized that although many Iraqis had died in the convoy, most had jumped from their vehicles and run away. He summed up his feeling with this distraction and intrusion by later writing, "I felt irritated--Washington was ready to overreact, as usual, to the slightest ripple in public opinion. I thought, but didn't say, that the best thing the White House could do would be to turn off the damned TV in the situation room."¹⁹

The commander also faces immediate and consequential problems in his operational area where the direct burden and headaches of the press are felt. There are three important factors that are problematic and directly impact the commander: (a) the commander's ability to "meet" the press and promote his vision or policies; (b) the management of a large number of journalists, national and international; and (c) the capability to create an organization that can respond effectively to the drumbeat of the press.

During an operation, it is not a question whether a commander will "meet" the press, but when. More importantly, few commanders will be prepared for the intensity of that meeting; therefore, their perception of the press will serve or hinder them. Conversely, the public's perception of the operation may well rest with that meeting. Credibility is the coin of the realm and the commander must be prepared and able to argue the merits and defend the consequences of his policies. To be credible, he must seem safe (kind, just, friendly); qualified (trained, experienced, informed); and dynamic (bold, active, energetic).²⁰ Schwarzkopf was credible. He followed several commonsense rules: (1) "don't let them intimidate you" (2) "there's no law that says you have to answer all their questions" (3) "don't answer any question that in your judgment would help the enemy"--and the most important rule--(4) "never lie to the American public."²¹

Second, management of a large number of journalists is a tough issue, with no easy answers. The debate centers primarily on journalists' desire for freedom of movement and immediate transmission of stories. Military commanders, on the other hand, want to restrict journalists for safety and security reasons. Western countries for decades have viewed news management or indirect influence as legitimate particularly during war. U.S. polls during the middle of the Gulf War showed a widely accepted belief that different rules apply to media

coverage during times of war; 70% wanted more restrictions placed on reporting of war.²²

While the debate of press pools is beyond the scope of this paper, I believe it is important to note that the use of pools, usually as a last resort, has not been historically uncommon. The military's view that the press cannot be allowed to roam the battlefield at will is valid. Likewise, valid is the press' view that pools should be short-term and instituted on as few occasions as possible. Also, once the pools have been activated, the military should provide the means for the press to file stories rapidly, allowing journalists the right to self-censor. On these two issues there will always be mutual mistrust and mutual accommodation. It's part of the shared military-press heritage during war. Although there was enormous spilt ink on this subject, the best relationship is one of cooperation not opposition.

Further cementing this argument is that exclusion or direct censorship of the press is not only legally doubtful and politically damaging, but is also rapidly becoming impossible with the advent of advanced media technology. On the issue of controlling the media within justified bounds, the military stands the high ground. During the Gulf War, "most people believed and accepted that the version of events they received while the war was being fought was incomplete; they understood the reason for this (safety and security), but expected that the truth would be revealed in due course."²³ Unfortunately as the "friendly fire" incidents began to unravel, the military proved less than forthcoming initially.²⁴ It is the mishandling of these kinds of events that degrade the argument for bona fide control of the press.

In the final analysis, military-press relations must be cooperative rather than exclusionary or coercive. After the Persian Gulf War, DOD reinforced this concept two ways: (a) by stating that in the future "open and independent reporting" would be the principle means of coverage, and

(b) by insisting that journalists would have to follow the "ground rules."²⁵ Accommodation for both sides will still be the primary ingredient for each to get along.

Finally, planning and creating an organization that can respond effectively to the press cannot be left to chance. Not enough emphasis can be made to ensure that "a carefully-planned, well-resourced, and decisively-positioned infrastructure is necessary" to communicate the goals, policies, and vision of the command.²⁶ Generally, JTFs are "come as you are parties" and are most vulnerable at inception. It's a "second wave" organization that will be required to interact with a "third wave" medium capable of transmitting images at incredible speeds around the globe.²⁷ This problem can be overcome by fielding a public affairs infrastructure that has the capability to respond effectively and rapidly. Equipment is only one important part of the requirement. The larger issue is that those designated to communicate with reporters must be able to get accurate, reliable information from within the organization quickly.²⁸ This requirement is particularly challenging during moments of crisis. This was illustrated in Somalia by a colonel's refusal to supply timely information about a wounding when he retorted, "It's classified. Everything we say to you guys gets in the press."²⁹ This action prohibited the command from properly characterizing the circumstances of the incident, resulting in doubts about the effectiveness of the military activity.

Operational Art= Recipe for Press Success

In their assessment of the Gulf War, Pimlott and Badsey believe the key to success with the press is a recognition by the operational commander that:³⁰ a) an official statement should never contain a conscious lie, b) information strategy is dictated by broader political and military strategy, c) public affairs officers must be aware of what's happening and commanders must be

aware of the press implications of their actions, d) media relations work best by treating journalists as allies rather than enemies and by trust rather than restriction, e) cutting off information will not restrict the news flow, f) psychological operations should be kept entirely separate from any agency responsible with contact with the press. These commonsense rules of the road have been discovered and rediscovered by military commanders throughout history. The successful commanders learn them well and don't forget.

Recommendations

While the operational commander would like to control everything in his area of operation, he obviously cannot. This problem is not new, and every commander throughout history has faced it. Recognizing what he can influence and what is out of his control is half the battle. By placing the proper emphasis on the importance of press relations during the planning and execution phase of the operation, the CJTF prepares himself and his organization to overcome resource constraints and decision-making requirements that otherwise fracture unprepared organizations. General Walt Boomer provides a perfect example in his guidance to his commanders, "Commanders should include public affairs requirements in their operational planning to ensure that the accomplishments of our Marines are reported to the public."³¹ Just as greatness in battle requires an instinct for responding to the unknown; preparing for the press requires an instinctive ability to plan and shape activities in support of military and political goals.³² The commander has a significant, proactive impact on policy and perception by planning, assessing, and reassessing,

The statement by President Bush, "I learn more from CNN than I do from the CIA," is an indication of the future.³³ There is little a JTF commander can do about the strategical advent of

media diplomacy and the consequences of increased intrusion from the Pentagon. He can, however, anticipate problems up front and take them into consideration as risks during the planning phase.

In the operational arena, there are positive steps he can take in the planning and execution phases to heighten his chances for success. The Joint Operational Planning and Execution System (JOPES) provides the framework for developing warplans. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the planning process in detail; however, the process is important and I have listed below some important points:³⁴

1. **Commander's Intent-** Unifies effort and unleashes commanders to act, provides focus and perspective. It's the operational glue. It's here that the commander makes known the importance of press relations.
2. **Courses of Action-** Considering press implications with each course of action contributes to staff synchronization, coordinates policy issues, and identifies assumptions and risks. Coordinates ways, means, and ends.
3. **Developing Orders-** Forces organization to consider the command and control and support requirements necessary to respond successfully to press requirements.
4. **Planning Again-** Repeating the process as the operation continues allows for feedback, fine tuning, and for adjustments to correct wrong assumptions.

The are many benefits from this planning method: First, the command and organization can prepare to articulate a cogent, harmonious policy. Second, it creates an organization that can deal with a changing environment, particularly during the execution phase. Third, unity of command and effort are strengthened because ends, means, ways, and risks are considered at all stages of the planning process. Fourth, it allows the organization to be "proactively reactive": reactive to the extent [the organization] must be responsive to news media interest; proactive in

that knowledgeable assessments, comprehensive planning and advanced preparation will inevitably determine how effectively they will be able to respond."³⁵

The importance of the ability to articulate, argue the merits, and defend the consequences of policy is vital to the success of the commander operationally. Events in Somalia and Haiti provide a concrete example.³⁶ The images of the dead U.S. Ranger being dragged through the streets of Somalia enraged Americans and challenged the merits of our presence. The failure of leaders at all levels to prepare the public for a shift in U.S. goals, from humanitarian activities to hunting down Aideed, made the loss politically overwhelming. The U.S. offered no credible rationale for going after Aideed, failed to link the problem of Aideed to the greater goal of relief and stability, and offered no immediate eulogies to redeem the Rangers' losses. In this "media war," the U.S. was unprepared to defend its policies. It should have come as no surprise that this crisis, amplified through global images, encouraged other mischief makers to create news for their own purposes. Few will forget the images, shortly after the Ranger incident, where a tenth-rate Haitian dictator turned away an Navy LST by using global images to his advantage.

Conclusion

The world is changing so fast that it is difficult to comprehend; it affects our perspective by accelerating and condensing our history simultaneously.³⁷ In this world of change, it would be inadequate to understand decision making without understanding the role of the press and the impact it has on the formation of policy and the performance of institutions.³⁸ With rapid changes in technology and economies, ideas can make a difference in mobilizing political action and shaping the world.³⁹ For these reasons, the dialogue between the press and the military must

continue. It must be a dialogue which faces up to questions of responsibility and accountability.

One that understands the constructive role the press can play in formulation of policy.⁴⁰

Media technology and reporting requirements will enlarge the battle area globally, while at the same time shrink and blur the distinction between the strategical and operational levels of war. Commanders at the operational level will be required to anticipate the problems of "strategic" intrusion and distraction, as well as, plan for press coverage before, during, and after the operation. Successful commanders will recognize the importance of identifying the press as a "friendly, non-lethal fire" and build an organization that will ensure a decision cycle that produces accurate, timely information. This will allow organizations to respond to fast-moving events, both positive and negative.

The rapidity of future changes can only guarantee uncertainty. By recognizing the impact of these changes, operational commanders can begin to anticipate the problems and opportunities of tomorrow. Those that view the press as an opportunity and a risk and are willing to plan for unanticipated changes will be the successful commanders of the future.

ENDNOTES

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²⁰ Frank Stech, "Winning CNN Wars," **Parameters**, (Autumn 1994): 40-42.

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²² Pimlott and Badsey, 220.

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²⁴ Discussion at OASD(PA) meetings prior to DoD "Friendly Fire" press briefing.

²⁵ U.S. Dept. of Defense Directive 5122.5, Washington, May 1992.

²⁶ Charles Ricks, "The Military-News Media Relationship: Thinking Forward," **Strategic Studies Institute**, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, (1993): 3.

²⁷ Alvin Toffler, **Power Shift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century**, xx.

²⁸ Ricks, 3.

²⁹ Comment by J-3 watch officer during cantonment operations against Aideed.

³⁰ Pimlott and Badsey, 225.

³¹ John Shotwell, "The Fourth Estate as a Force Multiplier," **Marine Corps Gazette**, July 1991, 72-73.

³² Stech, 44.

³³ Ibid., 38.

³⁴ Points adapted from Senior Leadership Warfighting Seminar, Quantico, VA, May, 1995.

³⁵ Ricks, 3.

³⁶ Stech, 43.

³⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, **Out of Control: On the Eve of the 21st Century** (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1993), ix-x.

³⁸ Martin Linsky, **How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking** (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 1.

³⁹ Brzezinski, ix-x.

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